

September 15, 2021

Delivered by Email

Honorable Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner
Leldamy Correa, Chief of Staff
75 Pleasant Street
Malden, Massachusetts 02148

Re: Access to Technology

Dear Commissioner Riley:

The undersigned organizations write jointly to recommend that the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (“DESE”), adopt specific measures to confront the technological inequities Massachusetts students face in the classroom and remotely. Even before the pandemic, in Massachusetts alone, 42,260 households with school aged children were without Internet subscriptions, and 14,047 households with school aged children were without any computing device.¹ The pandemic has brought to the forefront the inequity of access to technology and the severity of the digital divide plaguing the Commonwealth. We ask DESE, alongside the legislature’s Commission on Technology-Enabled Teaching and Learning, to remove the barriers to technology that students of color and low-income students face. Tech equity in Massachusetts will be achieved when every student has access to a laptop, every family has broadband internet access, and when the racial and socio-economic gap to tech opportunities has been resolved.

Addressing these disparities will require a multi-level approach that includes not only devices, but also more robust technology-related investments for students, families, and educators. More specifically, we are urging DESE to collaborate with us to create and implement a tech equity plan that aims to mend tech infrastructure, accessibility, usability, and learning by: 1) ensuring Internet accessibility; 2) leveraging access to devices; 3) providing technical support; 4) engaging community partners; and 5) hiring a Tech Equity Coordinator. The recommendations are discussed in greater detail below.

I. Ensure Internet Accessibility

Certain areas of Massachusetts are more affected than others by the digital divide. For example, in rural Massachusetts communities, there are severe gaps in Internet service subscriptions. In Franklin County, towns such as Monroe and Wendell contain 51 percent of households and 40 percent of households without internet service subscriptions respectively.² Low-income urban communities are also affected with areas like Springfield (31 percent), Lawrence (31 percent),

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, *Age By Presence Of A Computer And Types Of Internet Subscription In Household*, (ACS Survey 2019),
<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=internet&g=0400000US25&tid=ACSDT1Y2019.B28005&hidePreview=true>.

² *Gateway Cities at the Center of the Digital Divide in Massachusetts*, MassINC (May 5, 2020),
<https://massinc.org/2020/05/05/gateway-cities-at-the-center-of-the-digital-divide-in-massachusetts/>.

Holyoke (29 percent), and Lowell (27 percent) demonstrating severe lack of internet access.³ Even for Massachusetts households with internet at home, about 9 percent of those households depend solely on unstable connections to the internet such as mobile phone data plans.⁴ More proactive measures are needed to fully address this inequity.

In a survey conducted by Sociedad Latina, youth participants in a summer program focus group reported:

- 5 out of 9 students had missed a class, program, or assignment due to not having internet access;
- 6 out of 8 students have relied on public WiFi or technology to complete school assignments; and
- 5 out of 8 students have had to complete school assignments on a phone because they did not have a computer.

A. Provide Portable Hotspots

One alternative to connecting households to WiFi internet is providing portable hotspots. A WiFi hotspot is a physical location that has been provided to give users the ability to use their devices away from home. The device has a mobile router within it and can be used to connect several devices at once without downloading any additional software to the devices. Hotspot devices still require an internet provider, whether it be pre-paid through a provider such as Cricket Wireless⁵, or a monthly subscription provider such as T-Mobile or Verizon. The hotspot provides accessibility to the Internet beyond the home and allows users to retrieve WiFi signal whether they are in a park, on a field trip with their school, or at home participating in a virtual classroom. Portable hotspots should be provided to low-income households to provide flexible connectivity. Hotspots could be provided to eligible households based on need and income and eligibility criteria and could be based on a student's eligibility for free or reduced lunch, or a family's participation in a public assistance program. Portable hotspot devices can range from \$50 to \$200 in cost depending upon the provider but are often reduced in price if part of a subscription.⁶ These could be purchased by the Commonwealth and DESE in bulk and distributed through schools and community groups to guarantee that each student has access to the Internet.

³ *Id.*

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, *Types of Computers and Internet Subscriptions*, (ACS Survey 2019), <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=Internet&g=0400000US25&tid=ACSS1Y2019.S2801&hidePreview=true>

⁵ Cricket Wireless, https://www.cricketwireless.com/data-device/turbo-hotspot-2.html?utm_source=google&utm_medium=surfaces&utm_campaign=shopping%20feed&utm_content=free%20google%20shopping%20clicks&utm_source=Google_PPC&utm_medium=Paid_Search&utm_campaign=GM_eComm&utm_content=Evergreen_Shopping&utm_term=&gclid=Cj0KCQjw3f6HBhDHARIsAD_i3D_Jk8FSQT5VtlnQwMnxoNgmiM_SGbJMLloSSrgvLWUcKpfQs_l8OgsaAmNJEALw_wcB&gclid=aw.ds

⁶ See Verizon Wireless, <https://www.verizon.com/internet-devices/verizon-jetpack-mifi-8800l/?sku=sku3220058>; T-Mobile, <https://www.t-mobile.com/hotspot-iot-connected-devices/franklin-t9-mobile-hotspot?sku=610214660763>

B. Negotiate with Internet Providers on Behalf of Massachusetts Families

During the pandemic, some municipalities worked with Internet providers to secure discount packages and help provide access to those in need. However, too often, these discounts and packages served as a temporary solution to a long-standing issue. For example, Boston Public School's (BPS) website currently reroutes a viewer to the City of Boston's webpage with internet provider assistance options.⁷ These options include Comcast's "60 days of free service," and "Starry" which offers free service through the end of May so long as the recipient lives "in a building that is currently served by the Starry Connect program."⁸ During the pandemic, other emergency programs were implemented to assist those in need of access to the internet. For example, the Federal Communications Commission's Emergency Broadband Benefit ("EBB") program provides broadband and device benefits for qualifying low-income consumers during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹ However, the EBB program is temporary and will expire when the fund is exhausted or six months after the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services declares an end to the COVID-19 health emergency.¹⁰ Although some service providers have created discounted packages during the pandemic, the need for Internet access existed well before the pandemic, and will persist as we become a more technology-driven society.

A student's ability to access educational content should not rest on whether they are eligible for a temporary internet discount. The Commonwealth and DESE should negotiate with internet providers to provide real options for households to gain and keep access to the internet. Negotiations could consist of long-term discounted internet subscriptions, discounted portable hotspots for schools to distribute to low-income students, or income-based pricing to balance the financial burden for low-income families. Households should not be subject to consumer deals and packages that are temporary or riddled with contingencies. Families need viable and durable solutions to gain and maintain access to the internet.

C. Subsidized Internet for Low-Income Families

If families are unable to afford internet, the Commonwealth or DESE should cover the full cost of internet. Sometimes, regardless of a discount, any cost for internet is too much. Families should not be burdened with an internet bill if they are unable to pay. A subsidized program should be streamlined and be offered to households that qualify for unemployment, housing assistance, public assistance programs, or if students qualify for free or reduced lunch. DESE should consider subsidized internet in its budget to cover the cost of internet and meet the needs of Massachusetts families. By allocating specific funds to providing a subsidized internet program for low-income households, Massachusetts would lead by example and bridge the digital divide giving families in need the ability to stay connected in a time of disarray.

⁷ Boston Public Schools, <https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/Page/8157>; see also City of Boston, <https://www.boston.gov/news/internet-connectivity-and-technology-supports-during-covid-19-response>.

⁸ City of Boston, <https://www.boston.gov/news/internet-connectivity-and-technology-supports-during-covid-19-response>.

⁹ Federal Communications Commission, *Emergency Broadband Benefit*, <https://www.fcc.gov/broadbandbenefit>

¹⁰ *Id.*

A lack of access to the internet hinders the ability for students to receive meaningful education. These issues are reflected in students' stories like Tyrell's, a student at Excel High School and a Youth Leader in Sociedad Latina's Youth Artist Mastery program, who was forced to attend classes on his smartphone. This made it very difficult for him to have multiple tabs open and even participate in his classes. Asked if he ever missed class, an assignment, or program meeting due to technology issues, he replied: "I think once; no, it was two times. My wifi went out, and I didn't have a hotspot." He noted: "it happened during the school year and during summer classes." Though his high school did provide him with a Chromebook, he was not given consistent access to high quality internet. He further shared: "I would go to school to access their wifi any chance I got." Using his at-home wifi made things very difficult, because he was restricted by the speed and quality of his family's plan: "with my wifi at home, my classes would lag if I had my camera on. Things would cut out, which made showing my face frustrating, because I had to sacrifice the quality of the teacher's call. I often resorted to muting my video and audio and participating through the chat box." This seemed to be the case for many other students, as Tyrell stated: "barely anyone had their cameras on for similar reasons." Tyrell commented that people not showing their faces made remote learning impersonal. He feels like his classmates are strangers and that group assignments feel like a job, not like a team of students. His final remarks, however, offered some positives on remote learning. He stated: "I got experience on how to be on a call with other people, which I know is important for job opportunities in the future."

II. **Leverage Access to Devices**

Access to the internet only solves part of the problem. Massachusetts students should have access to proper devices to meaningfully participate in the classroom. Even for Massachusetts households with computing devices at home, about 8 percent of households rely on smartphone devices alone, with no other computing device.¹¹ DESE should work to address this inequity and give students an equal educational opportunity.

A. **1-to-1 Student Chromebooks Year-Round**

DESE should require that all school districts provide 1-to-1 student Chromebooks year-round. Access to a laptop is critical for students to post assignments, watch recorded classroom lessons, print worksheets, or virtually participate in after-school programs and technology camps. Access to laptops, rather than tablets or other smart devices, is imperative because tablets and smart devices are less reliable and lack the functionality necessary to use the two primary host apps, Clever and Google Classrooms,¹² along with other essential functions such as video and presentation programs. For example, Chromebooks are the only compatible laptop for the STEM Camp "Kids 4 Coding,"¹³ where both iPads and tablets are incompatible and would not allow a student to participate in the STEM program. During the pandemic, many school districts struggled

¹¹ U.S. Census Bureau, *Types of Computers and Internet Subscriptions*, (ACS Survey 2019), <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=Internet&g=0400000US25&tid=ACSST1Y2019.S2801&hidePreview=true>

¹² Boston Public Schools, <https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/page/8081>.

¹³ *Kids 4 Coding*, <https://www.kids4coding.com/virtual-summercourses>.

to provide Chromebooks. For example, September 2020 data from Boston Public Schools (BPS)¹⁴ confirms the scope and scale of the challenges surrounding the distribution of Chromebooks:

- Madison Park High School in Roxbury is over 50% Latinx, 38% Black, and 2.6% white. BPS data revealed that the District did not fulfill 80% of the requests for Chromebooks that came from regular education students. Nearly 74% of disabled students who requested a Chromebook never received one.
- At Burke High School—which is over 62% Black, 29% Latinx, and 3.6% white—50% of students with disabilities and 45% of nondisabled students who requested a Chromebook never received one.

These numbers were deeply concerning when compared to BPS schools with majority white student populations:

- At the Kilmer K-8 School—which is over 51% white—BPS fulfilled over 97% of Chromebook requests from students without disabilities.
- More than 56% of the students at the Warren-Prescott School are white, and nearly 97% of students with disabilities who requested a Chromebook received one from BPS.

To be sure, BPS made significant progress during the pandemic, but other school districts did not make nearly enough progress. As these dynamics illustrate, school districts across the Commonwealth need more resources, coordination, and technical support from DESE to overcome all distribution challenges. A 1-to-1 match is an urgent and necessary step toward ensuring racial and socio-economic equity in Massachusetts year-round.

The issues with access to technology are far from isolated incidents. First-hand accounts of tech inequity are shared directly from students like Norma, a middle school student in Sociedad Latina’s STEAM Team program, who did not have a personal computer in her home at the beginning of the pandemic. To stay involved in her classes and complete her homework, she had to attend virtual classes on her smartphone. After a couple weeks struggling, her school finally provided a laptop. Norma noted: “Having a computer made life easier, but I had to return it at the end of the year, so I didn’t have one anymore.”

B. Access to Wireless Printers

Increased access to technology should also include the availability of wireless printers to students. Students should be able to have access to printed text, worksheets, lessons, and other paper copies to fully use the technology offered by their Chromebooks and stay connected to their lessons offered online.

¹⁴ *Digital Divide in Boston Public Schools Exacerbates Disparities Along Racial Lines and Disabilities*, Lawyers for Civil Rights (Sept. 17, 2020), <http://lawyersforcivilrights.org/our-impact/education/digital-racial-gap-in-boston-public-schools/> (collecting, analyzing and disseminating data from public records produced by BPS).

III. Provide Technical Support

A. After-School Time and Tech Literacy

Massachusetts schools need to support learning, development, and engagement outside of class time, including through after-school programming. After-school time provides an opportunity for students to learn online programs, digital platforms, and coding to advance their knowledge and technological competency. The need for this proficiency is crucial for K-12 student engagement and learning. It will also equip students with the tools and knowledge they need to continue their education, enter technology reliant careers, and have more future opportunities. The tech equity gap is both a racial and socio-economic inequity that can be solved. Real, obtainable solutions should be implemented to repair lost learning from the pandemic and serve both children and families of Massachusetts. The allocation of meaningful Commonwealth and DESE resources will provide schools the ability to support after-school learning and tech literacy.

B. Continued Education through STEM Camps and Digital Platforms

Students should have the opportunity to participate in local and national STEM Camps such as “Camp Invention Connect,” a remote STEM camp that costs \$235 per child.¹⁵ Some STEM programs are offered throughout the academic year, but the summer term offers a more expansive, intensive camp experience where students can be fully immersed in STEM activities. Meaningful Commonwealth and DESE resources should be dedicated to support free STEM programs across school districts and to provide stipends for low-income students to attend STEM camps that would otherwise be unaffordable. STEM education and tech literacy programs are essential for repairing lost learning from the pandemic and creating opportunities for historically excluded communities.

A computer is only but a tool used for greater learning and development. Funding could also be provided for STEM programs to be created free-of-charge to Massachusetts students. For example, “BoSTEM” brings high-quality science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) opportunities for free to every Boston middle schooler through an innovative citywide coalition of nonprofits, schools, researchers, and industry partners.¹⁶ By supporting both the creation of, and existing, STEM programs, students will not have to face a socio-economic burden for STEM education.

C. Tech Literacy for Parents

Tech literacy should extend to parents to engage with the classwork and education of their child, as students more often succeed when parent engagement levels are high. Expanding the reach and amplifying the scope of tech literacy for parents creates a home where parents can meaningfully engage with educators and have the capability to attend virtual parent-teacher conferences. Training would strengthen school-family connections that would educate families on essential technology skills and platforms so that parents also gain the knowledge necessary to use technology.

¹⁵ Camp Invention Connect, https://www.invent.org/camp-invention-connect?_ga=2.12371901.828357381.1627399902-54701787.1627399902.

¹⁶ BoSTEM, <https://bostonbeyond.org/approach/innovation/stem/>

IV. Community Partner Engagement

DESE and the Commonwealth should provide grants for organizations that have the relationships and connections with the communities most in need. Funding for tech literacy workshops hosted by community partners such as Open Opportunity Massachusetts (OOMA), the NAACP, the Urban League, the Greater Boston Latino Network, Sociedad Latina, Centro Presente, Boston's Higher Ground Tech Equity Initiative, and La Colaborativa will provide tech literacy opportunities to immigrant communities and communities of color. The allocation of meaningful Commonwealth and DESE resources would provide much-needed funding to community-based allies to create and present technology programs in vulnerable communities.

V. Hire a Tech Equity Coordinator

To ensure successful application and outcome, a full-time Tech Equity Coordinator would need to be appointed to implement and enforce the tech equity plan outlined above, coordinate the needed resources, and track the outcomes and impact of the plan to ensure successful execution. The Tech Equity Coordinator would also be responsible for interfacing with DESE and school districts on a quarterly basis concerning tech plan progress and impact. A Tech Equity Coordinator is essential for the roll-out of an expansive program aimed to meet the 21st century needs of so many Massachusetts families. A clear, streamlined process will make access more feasible and impact easier to measure. Education is the gatekeeper of opportunity, and these recommendations are vital for creating a more inclusive, equitable learning experience in Massachusetts.

We are respectfully requesting an opportunity to meet and discuss our recommendations in hopes of fostering opportunities for partnership and collaboration. Please contact the undersigned via email at swilson@lawyersforcivilrights.org. We look forward to your response and to working in collaboration and partnership to support our youth and families.

Sincerely,

Sara Wilson

On behalf of the undersigned community leaders and organizations

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